



Associated Press

Maj. Richard Laritz demonstrates gesture of surrender made by unarmed U.S. officer before being killed.

## U.S. Body Hunter Killed by VC

By Philip A. McCombs

Washington Post Foreign Service

SAIGON, Dec. 15—An American Army captain was killed and four other American soldiers wounded in a hail of gunfire this morning in an apparently well-planned Communist ambush of an unarmed body recovery team authorized under the Paris peace agreement.

A South Vietnamese pilot was killed and several South Vietnamese soldiers were wounded.

The ambush took place in a rice paddy 15 miles southwest of Saigon this morning as three unarmed and brightly marked helicopters carrying 13 American soldiers and flown by 12 South Vietnamese

military men landed to begin a body search.

An American member of the body recovery team said the dead officer "was murdered in cold blood."

(In Washington, the Pentagon and State Department denounced the ambush. Secretary of Defense James R. Schlesinger called it "a despicable act" and warned that the

United States "should be prepared to take the necessary measures" to prevent a recurrence.)

American and South Vietnamese officials here said that

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### VIETNAM, From A1

the People's Revolutionary Government (Vietcong) and the North Vietnamese delegates to the four-party Joint Military Team had been notified of today's search on Dec. 6 and had signed receipts stating that they knew about it.

Wire services reported that officials of these two delegations denied having been notified in advance of today's search and said they had not heard of the ambush.

"It is my understanding that they knew we were coming," said one of the American survivors, Maj. Richard Laritz, in a dramatic press conference this afternoon.

"Having been in tactical assaults before, having set up ambushes myself, this was a well-executed ambush. It was deliberate and it was professional. If I were setting it up myself I could not have done a better job."

Laritz, speaking in a low, firm voice, told reporters that the dead American officer, Capt. Richard M. Rees, 32, of Kent, Ohio, was shot down while holding his hands high in the air in a gesture of surrender.

He said Rees was unarmed as were the other Americans. All the Americans wore green combat fatigues, but these fatigues had bright orange markings of the officially sanctioned body-search team, an American embassy spokesman here said.

Slowing his words for emphasis, Laritz looked at the crowded room of reporters and asserted:

"Now, ladies and gentlemen, I've fought in the Korean War and I've fought in numerous battles in Vietnam. Now, I've seen many people die and I can understand people dying in war, but in this case we were protected by international law. We were unarmed. My man, my officer was gunned down. He was murdered in cold blood. Simple as that."

Maj. Phu Binh, chief spokesman for the North Vietnamese delegation to the joint military team, said "I would like to point out that the United States and the Saigon administration have several times taken advantage of Joint Military Team marked aircraft for reconnaissance purposes contrary to the Paris agreement. We have several times denounced such dirty acts."

A U.S. embassy spokesman here said the U.S. and South Vietnamese governments are preparing protests of the incident to submit to the International Commission of Control and Supervision, the body charged with supervising the Vietnam cease-fire.

Laritz told a chilling story of a ferocious ambush, made all the more chilling because the area was so close to Saigon and considered so secure that many newsmen were invited to the area only yesterday on the team's preliminary visit there.

The team was searching for the missing body of a U.S. serviceman whose helicopter was downed there in 1960.

All the Americans on the team are members of the Joint Casualty Resolution Center, a strictly American operation based in Thailand and with

the job of finding the remains of 2,400 missing or dead American servicemen in Indochina.

The members of the center are allowed to enter Vietnam to search for bodies after the members of the four-party Joint Military Commission here are notified. The JMC is a negotiating body that works out the details of such searches.

Because its four members—the United States, South and North Vietnam and the Vietcong—do not often agree, searches have been limited so far.

An American embassy spokesman said there have been no searches in Laos or Cambodia, or in Vietcong-controlled areas of South Vietnam. An American team was allowed to go to North Vietnam to look at the gravesite of 24 Americans who died in captivity, but these bodies have not yet been returned to the United States because of further disagreements in the Joint Military Commission.

Today's body search was the 11th in South Vietnam since the Jan. 28 cease-fire, officials said. During that time 31 bodies have been recovered, 10 of which have been positively identified.

Teams like the one that went in today are made up of men who clear the search areas of mines and boobytraps. They include morticians and other experts.

Laritz said all the men on today's mission were Special Forces troops (Green Berets) who last week received refresher courses on how to escape and evade the enemy in

the field.

Following their training, some of these soldiers lay down and played dead until they were rescued, he said.

He also said the soldiers had recently been reminded that if they came under hostile fire they were to surrender imme-

diately "to insure that we took the least possible casualties."

Laritz said that the helicopters landed at 8:40 this morning. The ordnance men got out first and checked for mines, then the choppers set down.

Most of the team were off the choppers "when we were taken under intense enemy fire. Initially, I heard four heavy explosions alongside my helicopter."

Laritz said that the fire came from a palm grove near the landing site in an uncultivated rice paddy area.

He said of the killed officer, "I don't know if he was knocked down by a bullet or an explosion . . . He picked himself out of the grass and mud . . . He said something, I don't know what he said, and then he was shot and killed."

Then, one of the helicopters was hit by a rocket and exploded.

Laritz said rockets and machine guns were firing at them "and people standing right in the open shooting at us."

He said the Americans and South Vietnamese "tried to take whatever action they could to defend themselves."

The two remaining helicopters, though riddled with gunfire, took off after about three minutes from the start of the ambush. Laritz was on one of them.

Left on the ground were half a dozen or more Americans and Vietnamese.

The choppers tried to get back in to rescue them, but the fire was too intense, Laritz said.

After 10 or 15 minutes, South Vietnamese helicopter gunships were summoned from Saigon and began firing on the ambushers. Under cover of this fire, the dead and wounded on the ground were recovered.

Laritz praised the South Vietnamese pilots and crew members who, he said, repeatedly risked their lives under intense fire to rescue those on the ground.

"I recommend that these men be given the highest decoration available," he said.

Laritz was asked if the government had been incorrect in saying the area was secure, since the government claims to control many areas that everybody knows in fact it does not control.

"Negative," he replied, saying that in any guerrilla war it is possible for a small band to slip into almost any area. "I believe the government information was accurate and timely."

The one destroyed chopper was left on the ground while the other two choppers and all the dead and wounded were recovered.

A U.S. embassy spokesman said that the team had gone to the area on three successive days, today being the last. He said the receipt signed by the Communists to acknowledge that they were aware of the search in the area covered a period of several days.

He said the three successive days the team went to the area were covered by the period in the receipt.

The injured Americans were identified as Lt. Ben C. Elfrink, of Isabel, S.D., who was said to be in very serious condition; Sp. 4 Randall J. Nash of Amarillo, Tex.; Sgt. Herman C. Ballard, of Columbus, Ohio, and Sgt. Ronnie L. Watson, of North Fort Pierce, Fla.

The only other American killed by hostile fire in South Vietnam since the cease-fire was shot dead the day after it took effect.

### *Australian Offers*

#### *Assistance to Vietnam*

From News Dispatches

Australian Overseas Trade Minister Jim Cairns said yesterday that, while he personally favors diplomatic recognition of the Vietcong, he would recommend to the government only communications with and humanitarian aid to the South Vietnamese Communists.

Speaking to reporters in Bangkok, on his way home from a visit to North Vietnam, Cairns said, "I never ask for more than I think the circumstances make possible."

In Canberra, the Australian government said it had received an official protest from the United States over Cairns' earlier statement at a press conference in Hanoi that U.S. policy was to control as much of North and South Vietnam as possible.